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ABSTRACT

The reprint of a 1984 article on language teaching for communicative competence focuses on the use of small group communicative activities. The benefits and advantages of small group (two to six participants) communications activities are outlined, including the increased opportunities for speaking, less intimidating context, retention of attention, opportunities for integrated language practice, and natural context for speaking. Common teacher concerns about small group activities include the limitations of student vocabulary or structures, need for preparation, grouping, error correction, equal student participation, and reversion to that native language. Potential solutions for these issues are offered. Characteristics of good small group activities are discussed briefly, and some sample reusable formats are described. These include role-playing, use of directed dialogue cards, chained statements, add-on statements, guessing games, and interviews. Examples of role-playing materials and a 24-item bibliography are appended. (MSE)

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1980-1984 THE REUSABLE COMMUNICATION FORMAT

(Reprinted from Dimension: 1984)

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There is great interest in the foreign language profession today in helping students to use the target language in meaningful ways, to accomplish real-life purposes via their new language. To help our students to do this, however, we need classroom activities appropriate to the objective, activities which facilitate the exchange of real information. Yet at least some of these activities must be suited to the limited repertoire of the beginner, who constitutes the bulk of our enrollments; and because teachers don't have endless time to seek out different formats, it would be very useful for us to have available formats that can be reused with different content as we move from topic to topic.

In addition, we need activities which will help students to communicate about the significant notions in the target language (common topics such as clothing, food, body parts, furnishings, etc. and common situations such as buying food, servicing a car, banking, etc.) and the more important functions in the target language (persuading, informing, implementing, apologizing, disagreeing, etc.). While we recognize students' needs to practice the linguistic structures of the language, we have decided that this practice must occur in meaningful, communicative contexts. Following a discussion of benefits of the small group format and factors to keep in mind when using it, I shall discuss characteristics of the good activity and then present examples of six different reusable small-group communication formats.

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Besides needing a body of interesting activities that facilitate communicative interaction in the above four categories we also need formats for our activities which maximize the students' opportunities to use the language. A student in a class of 30 may get to speak only 1/30th of the time available for student participation. Further, the amount of time devoted to student participation may be quite small. Many studies have estimated teacher talk as taking 50 to 80 percent of total class time, as most of the types of talk in most classrooms are teacher-centered (Kramsch, 1981). Even in those whole-group activities that are directed at student oral work, the teacher speaks 50 percent of the time in the usual teacher-student interaction pattern (Valette, 1978). These statistics suggest that there is a great potential advantage in small group work. Working with the whole class at once minimizes the amount of time that any one student is directly involved and may also maximize loss of attention between "turns." In small group activities each student participates much more frequently. Teacher-talk is minimized, and a student in a group of four should be able to participate 1/4 of the time. Thus his/her opportunities for meaningful exchanges are greatly increased. Further, the student gets to communicate with someone besides the teacher. The teacher is not the only person with whom the student can have a valuable communicative exchange, and the move to communication-centered teaching calls for a move from teacher-centered to group-centered (Eckard and Kearny, 1981).

By small group we mean any grouping of from two to six persons. For second language learning purposes any larger grouping doesn't permit or ensure sufficient participation by each group member.

BENEFITS AND ADVANTAGES

The potential benefits and advantages to using small group communications activities can be great. As noted previously, an obvious first benefit is in the increased amount of time available to each student to participate. In addition, there could be numerous affective benefits. First of all, studies of students' projected goals in second language study and of their post-class reactions to second-language study indicate that the students most valued learning to speak (Westphal, 1978). A small-group

communication emphasis offers the potential to help the students meet their speaking objectives.

Further, many second-language students are shy about speaking before a whole class. The small group format has the potential to alleviate that shyness (Paulston and Selekman, 1978). Students generally feel much more comfortable about participating in a group of three or four other learners.

Motivation is often greater in a small group activity. As previously noted, the student doesn't have to wait so long between turns when working in a small group. His/her attention is less likely to wander. Further, when real information is being exchanged, interpersonal involvement among the students is greater (Ur, 1981). Attention is less likely to wander for this reason also. Altogether then, the possible affective benefits of this format are numerous.

Small-group communication can also constitute integrated language practice. Further, this practice is occurring in a natural, contexted manner (Littlewood, 1981). In order to participate in open-ended activities, the student is called upon to synthesize his/her knowledge of linguistic structures, vocabulary domains, and registers within the target language (Yalden, 1981). While participating in more tightly structured activities, the student practices patterns that reflect a synthesis of forms, vocabulary and registers; and this practice may ultimately enable him/her to participate effectively in the open-ended activities. In addition, the student is learning to fulfill the functions of language and to communicate real needs and meanings in the target language ((Urzua, 1981). The functions become part of the synthesis as they are integrated with the aforementioned forms, vocabulary, and registers. And finally, all this integrated practice is accomplished within the appropriate cultural frame, as the student implements the target culture's particular formulas for disagreeing, apologizing, turn-taking, etc. (Eckard and Kearny, 1981).

Another benefit relates to time and material. If involving all students is a teacher's goal, this involvement can be accomplished more efficiently in a small-group situation than in a whole-class activity. A six-item activity gives each student a turn if a class of 30 is working in groups of six, whereas 30 items are required in a whole group activity if all students are to participate. Further, only six time units instead of 30 are needed to give everyone a turn. Clearly the teacher has to prepare less material and has more time available for other activities.

The small-group communication approach can be expected to motivate and relax students, to let them participate far more, and to afford them increased opportunities for integrated language use, thus meeting their own goals and those of their teachers.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN IMPLEMENTATION

The following represent teacher reservations about small-group activities and possible solutions:

(1) "Beginners don't know enough to do such an activity." Actually they do, as there are many formats that make use of a quite limited range of vocabulary and structures.

(2) "Students won't stay on task."
Students need preparations for group work. They need to understand the importance and benefits of what they are doing, and they need to have ground rules (Moskowitz, 1978). They also need a clear goal for the end of the activity. Thus prepared, most will usually stay on task. In addition, the teacher can offer "check" points to a group to see if the person called on can repeat what was just said in the group."

(3) "Forming groups disrupts the class."
Don't number off or scatter to form groups. Let students work with others according to where they are already seated.

(4) "Preparing the materials takes too much time."
Time is saved by not having to prepare whatever these activities replace. Further, as noted earlier, fewer items are required to give each group member one or more turns than to give each class one or more turns in the whole group. And finally, activities once prepared can be used again and again.

(5) "Students will make errors that won't be corrected."
Students in groups engage in peer teaching, helping one another express themselves effectively. Yet, certainly, they will make some uncorrected mistakes, as the teacher cannot hear the work of all groups at once; and teachers generally feel that it is a serious matter to let students speak incorrectly. Nevertheless, the beginner at self-expression must make mistakes, and students who have the opportunity throughout their study to use the target language creatively will ultimately use the language more effectively, more

extensively and more correctly then those who say little, however, correct (Savignon, 1978). Further, the use of more controlled activities for beginners will minimize errors.

(6) "One student will do all the work."
Build the activity so that all group members are required to participate. If students are each given a part of the information necessary to complete the task, for example, this will happen.

(7) "The students will get stuck and will revert to their native language."
Several factors can mitigate this problem. Encouraging peer teaching will cause students to provide vocabulary for one another. The teacher can supply items as needed as well while moving from group to group. The use of more controlled formats for beginners will also help, as will teaching/encouraging students to circumlocute in the target language. Students should also be provided with the vocabulary in the target language that is necessary to complete the activity if they don't already have it (Smith, 1981).

All in all, most potential problems in the use of small-group communication activities can be avoided by careful planning of the material and procedures and by preparing the students appropriately for the work that they are to do.

RECOGNIZING/CREATING THE GOOD ACTIVITY

The primary concern in selecting or writing small-group communication activities is finding a format that is based neither on free conversation, as this is unlikely to be understood by less-advanced students, nor on totally mechanical patterns that communicate nothing meaningful (Krashen, 1981). The format has to be understood but yet must be partially open-ended to allow for meaningful personalized communication. The amount of control will be further discussed below.

Another concern is to find a format that will generate more extended responses. Too many languages can be dealt with by using one-word responses. While vocabulary activities have their place, activities that call for the use of more extended responses will go further to facilitate communications goals. When using games or small-group activities, teachers should look for materials that involve the exchange or expression of real information.

Clearly such activities must be interesting to students in order to be successful. What is of interest is often difficult to determine. Personalization goes far in this direction, however. When students are expressing their own preferences, opinions and experiences to one another, they tend to be interested even if the topic in question is rather mundane. Using meaningful material about the participants rather than third-person mechanical material is also more effective (Littlewood, 1981). Students will care more about expressing what they did yesterday than about changing a group of sentences to past tense.

The task in question should be such that all students in each group can do it, assuming appropriate prior preparation, although perfection of performance is not necessary. Comprehension and participation are.

Material in such activities should relate to the syllabus, the test, or expressed student needs. It should not be the sort of activity that the students can view as a time-killer only. It should call for students to use everyday language as would be required in real-life situations, and if it also reinforces or practices the use of a structure or a vocabulary domain, all the better (Zelson, 1978). It should also have the student becoming familiar with language as used in the target culture, revealing norms of register or function appropriate to that culture.

In practical terms the activity should be reasonably simple for the teacher to prepare material for, to prepare the students for, and to implement. It should fit into the teacher's desired time frame (perhaps ten to thirty minutes), and it should be conducive to work by groups of from two to six students. If it is to be used for beginners, there should be a readily identifiable response range so that appropriate phrases and vocabulary options can be taught to the students first. The format should facilitate participation by all members of each group.

If all or even most of these criteria are met in selecting or preparing activities, success is much more nearly assured. The teacher will also be interested in identifying formats that have been successful with his/her students previously, so that these can be modified for new topics and reused.

SOME SAMPLE REUSABLE COMMUNICATIONS FORMATS

Use of the following formats facilitates the development of listening and speaking skills. The formats are reusable and can be redone with material from a variety of lessons.

Because the activities are done in small groups, each student's opportunity to participate is maximized. He/she gets to speak one-fourth of the time in group of four, instead of one-thirtieth of the time in a group of thirty.

The material should be as "real" and as personalized as possible, as in the examples to be demonstrated. This "realness" and personalization enhance both motivation and clarity of meaning, which often results in greater learning. Students enjoy the face-to-face practice and the opportunity to share real information, as opposed to practicing or manipulating essentially meaningless patterns.

I. ROLEPLAY (See below)

The teacher practices the phrases, questions, and sample dialogs with students. Then small groups create their own dialog for the incomplete dialogs and situations provided on the handout and perform them for the class. Each group may choose a situation, or the teacher may assign them.

II. DIRECTED DIALOG CARDS

Although the cards should be based on familiar material, the teacher may wish to review the vocabulary and/or phrases to be used. Then each group of students receives a packet of cards or slips. Each person in turn is to draw a card and look at the "ask" or "tell" side only. He/she then "asks" or "tells" according to the instructions, addressing another student in the group, who responds appropriately. They can then check their performance by looking at the sample question and answer on the back of the card. The teacher goes from group to group offering assistance. It is desirable to have three or four times as many cards as students per group.

Sample Card:

Ask someone where he/she usually studies	¿Dónde estudias generalmente? Generalmente estudio en mi recámara __ _____.

III. CHAINS

Each group gets a set of cards, one or two per student. Each card contains a familiar statement and answer format in the target language. Each student in turn starts his/her chain, which then goes around the group. He makes the statement given on his card (e.g., "My birthday is May 13th.") and asks the related question on the card of the person on his right (e.g., "When is your birthday?") who answers and asks the same question of the third person. When this question has gone around the group, the second person begins his "chain." The teacher goes from group to group, offering assistance.

IV. ADD-ONS

Each group gets a set of cards, one or two per student. Each card contains a familiar but incomplete statement in the target language. The first student in the group starts his/her statement, (e.g., "At the store last week I bought _____."), which then goes around the group with each person repeating what has already been said and adding on appropriately. When the first statement has gone around the group, the second student starts his/hers.

V. SITUATIONS

Each group gets a packet of cards, two per student. Each card describes a situation (in the native or the target language). Each student reads a card to himself, not letting others see it. Then student #1 monologs what he/she would say in that situation in the target language for the group, who must guess the situation. For example, he reads, "You see a child crying in front of the school. You go up to him and say something" and he says "¿Qué tienes, hijito? ¿Qué te pasó?" After the others

guess the situation, then the second person monologs for his/her situation, etc.

IV. INTERVIEWS

The teacher rehearses a set of questions and response formats with the class. Then the students are each to interview four other people with the questions, taking note of responses. After all have finished, the teacher rehearses report formats with the students, who then each report on one item of their choice.

For example, the interview might be:
¿Cómo se llama?
¿A qué persona famosa quiere conocer?
¿Qué ciudad quiere visitar?
¿Cuál es su color favorito?

The response formats would then be:
Me llamo _____
Quiero conocer a _____
Quiero visitar _____
Mi color favorito es _____

And the report formats would be
___(name)___ quiere conocer a
___(famous person)___.
___(name)___ quiere visitar
___(place)___.
El color favorito de ___(name)___ es
___(color)___.

Interviews can also be done with cards in small groups. Each group receives a packet of six cards. Each card has from one to three familiar questions with answer and report formats (see above). Each student asks his question(s) of the others in the group. All may speak at once (in pairs), or the teacher may direct that the others listen while each one asks. Then the teacher calls for reports from several (large class) or all (small class) students.

Note: On all activities teacher should interact afterward with students, using same items, in order to doublecheck comprehension, appropriateness of responses, etc.

Teacher should also extend the activity by asking any appropriate related questions.

ROLE PLAY: INVITATIONS

I. Expressions to practice

A. Asking and Explaining

I'm having a _____.
I'm going to _____ on _____ at _____.
Would you like to come?
Can you come?
Will you come?
Will you join us?
Would you be able to come?
We'd like you to come to _____ at ____ on _____.
It's on _____ at _____.
Are you free?
How about _____?

B. Accepting and Asking

I'd love to come.
I'd like to come.
I'll be there.
That's great!
How nice of you!
When is it?
I think so.
What time?
I'll look forward to it.

C. Declining

I'm sorry but I can't.
I'm busy then.
What a shame! I'll be out of town.
I hope you'll ask me again sometime.

D. Accepting response

I'm so glad.
My address is _____.
We'll see you then.

That's too bad.
Well, maybe next time.
We'll miss you.
It's at _____.

II. Sample to Practice

A. Hi, Susie. I'm having a birthday
party next week. Can you come?
I'd like to come. When is it?
It's on Friday at 4 o'clock.
That's great! I'll be there.

B. Hi, Bill. This is Patsy. We'd like you to come to dinner
next Tuesday. Are you free?
Yes, I think so. What time?
How about 7 o'clock.
That's fine. I'll look forward to it.
Great. We'll see you then.

III. Dialogs to Complete

A. Joe: Hi, Mary. I'm having a party
on Friday at seven.
Can you come?
Mary: _____.
Joe: Oh, what a shame. _____.
Mary: _____.

B. Judy: Paul, we're having a Christmas party on the
23rd. Will you join us?
Paul: _____.
Judy: That's great. It's at seven o'clock.
Paul: _____.

IV. Situations to Roleplay

You want to invite a friend to your house for a party.
You want to invite a friend to the movies.
You want to invite a friend to dinner at your house.

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